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ABSTRACT

This research project investigates the relationships between age and life satisfaction, self-concept, and locus of control among the aged. The predictions were based in large part on Erickson's adult development theory, and attempts were made to isolate the effects of age from other possible factors such as cohort and environment. The findings indicate that self-concept and life satisfaction are positively related to age. The oldest among the veterans appeared more satisfied with self and situation than did the younger veterans. Findings are discussed in terms of both Erikson's theory and disengagement theories of aging. (NG)

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# The Relationship of Age to Life Satisfaction, Locus of Control, and Self Concept in Elderly Domiciliary Residents

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In the literature dealing with age differences in self concept, life satisfaction and locus of control one can find support for most any proposition. Thus, there is evidence that internal control increases across age (Staats, 1974) and that IE status is not related to age (Kuypers, 1972) among the elderly; that self concept is generally more negative after 50 (Bloom, 1961; Dodge, 1961), that self concept becomes more positive across age (Hess and Bradshaw, 1970; Grant, 1969) and that there are no age differences in self concept (Nehrke, 1974); that life satisfaction increases with age (Chiriboga, 1974) and that life satisfaction decreases with age (Adams, 1971).

As to the relationship between the dependent variables what little work is available suggests that internal control is associated with higher life satisfaction (Nehrke, et al. in press; Palmore and Luikart, 1972) and positive self concept (Kuypers, 1972) and that self concept is positively related to life satisfaction (Hess and Bradshaw, 1970). These findings are basically in agreement with Erikson's (1950) characterization of his final psychosocial crisis of ego integrity.

One of the obvious problems with many of these investigation is that they are dealing with widely spaced cohorts to make their age difference statements while another problem exists in the different samples used in the studies. Thus, the intent of the present study was to examine age differences in self concept, locus of control and life satisfaction in a single elderly sample wherein cohort differences would not be so great, and the environment would be relatively constant. Aside from the age differences to be examined it was also hypothesized from Erikson's (1950) theory that self concept, internal

control and high life satisfaction would be positively related each to the others.

## Method

### Respondents

The men participating in the present study were part of a larger study of personal autonomy which has been reported elsewhere (Morganti and Nehrke, 1975). Thirty-three veterans from each of three age ranges (50-59, 60-69, 70+) provided data for the present paper. The men resided in a V.A. Domiciliary setting which, by definition, requires that they be able to basically care for themselves with a minimum of medic l or nursing supervision. There was a significant educational difference between the samples ($F = 4.319$, df 2/97, $p < .016$) with the oldest sample ($M = 8.9$) being significantly lower in years of education than the youngest sample ($M = 11.09$). The 60-69 year old sample ($M = 9.75$) was not different from the other two samples. Finally, as might also be expected, the eldest group has been in the V.A. facility ($M = 10.724$ years) significantly longer ($F = 6.00$, df 2/98, $p < .004$) than the 50-59 ($M = 5.107$ years) and 60-69 ($M = 6.50$ years) year old samples who were not different from each other.

### Procedure and Materials

Each of the respondents was requested to complete the questionnaire material on his own time at his own pace. The package included a scale on personal autonomy, a modified version of Rotter's (1966) IE scale, a revision of Neugarten, Havinghurst, and Tobin's (1961) Life Satisfaction Index A and a 29 item semantic differential scale based on the work of

Nehrke (1974). The IE scale modification involved deleting the filler items and items referring to the school situation. The items were scored for degree of internal orientation. The life satisfaction scale was reduced by three items and the scoring procedure was expanded to five levels instead of three. For the semantic differential responses were scored by assigning a 7 to the positive statement and 1 to the negative statement.

## Results

In order to examine the age differences in self concept, locus of control and life satisfaction, the data from each measure were entered into a one way analysis of variance. On the life satisfaction measure there was a significant age effect ($F = 4.66$, df 2/96, $p < .012$) such that the oldest group was more satisfied than the other two age groups who did not differ from each other. For the locus of control and self concept measures the age effects were not significant. However, due to the educational differences between the groups noted above and the correlation of education with locus of control ($r = .22$ $p < .05$) and self concept ($r = .18$ $p < .05$) it was decided to also perform analyses of covariance on these measures with years of education as the covariate. While this procedure did not change the locus of control results, the reanalysis of the self concept data did result in a significant age effect ($F = 51.2$, df 2/95, $p < .001$) such that the oldest group was significantly more positive in their statements than the youngest group. The middle group aged 60-69 was not different in total score from the other two groups.

On a more general level, the relationship of age, education and

length of tenure in the domiciliary to the dependent measures was examined using correlations (see Table 1). As expected, education evidenced a negative correlation with age and length of stay while age was positively related to length of stay. Also, as noted education was positively related to self concept and locus of control while age was positively related to life satisfaction and self concept. Since there was some degree of confounding in these data due to the relationship of self concept to age and education, a partial correlation of age and self concept with education partialed out was computed. The resulting coefficient was thus increased from .256 to .299 primarily due to the negative relationship of age and education.

With regard to the relationships among the dependent variables, it is to be noted that self concept correlated significantly with life satisfaction and locus of control, but that the relationship of locus of control and life satisfaction was not significant. Again, due to the apparent confounding noted above, partial correlations of self concept and locus of control with education partialed out and self concept and life satisfaction with age partialed out were computed. Thus the self concept locus of control procedure reduced that correlation to a non-significant value ($r = .137$, $p > .05$) while the self concept life satisfaction coefficient remained significant ($r = .443$, $p < .001$).

## Discussion

The data from the present study thus indicate that even within a relatively restricted set of elderly cohorts from a single residential setting life satisfaction and self concept are more positive for older veterans while no age in locus of control were observed. Furthermore,

the data indicate that while life satisfaction and self concept are related, the locus of control variable is not associated with either of these variables as had been observed previously (Nehrke et al., in press; Palmore & Luikart, 1972).

The results are suggestive of two interrelated interpretations. On the one hand, from disengagement theory, it may be postulated that the oldest group of veterans were more positive in their self concept and life satisfaction, at least in part, as a function of their significantly longer tenure in the domiciliary setting. Of course, this requires that institutionalization be viewed as a form of disengagement and that length of stay be an index of the extent of disengagement. This hypothesis is supported by the significant difference in length of stay in the domiciliary. The next question is whether or not institutionalization, which is usually associated with a blunting or dulling effect, is causally related to the positive age differences observed in self concept and life satisfaction. Put another way, does the domiciliary environment in fact provide a setting which fosters self acceptance or are the observed age differences a reflection of defensive reactions aimed at dissonance reduction?

Similarly, the data reflect on Erikson's (1950) theory regarding ego integrity vs despair. It may be proposed that the older veterans have attained, through life review, closeness to death or similar processes, a higher level of ego integrity. This proposition would also be based on the greater acceptance of self and situation which Erikson would characterize as indices of ego integrity. The two younger groups would then be seen as being in the initial stages of this process with, perhaps, insufficient pressure from death to facilitate the resolution of this

crisis. Unfortunately, the present study was not designed to test either of the above proposition and answers to such questions must await further empirical evidence.

One other area of interest with regard to Erikson's theory involves the locus of control measure. It has been suggested (Smith, 1968, Kuypers, 1972) that locus of control may be a central organizer of behavior or, in its relationship with life satisfaction, a potential index of ego integrity (Nehrke et al. in press). The fact that locus of control in the present study was not related to life satisfaction or self concept, after education was partialled out, does not support such contentions. One potential explanation for the present data would suggest that the institution, which has its own needs for control of the resident's behavior, may inadvertently be creating a state of conditioned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Thus, the resident who sees, time and again, that his behavior is not effective in determining what happens to him reduces the centrality of his own need for control. At the present time we do have a more extensive study of locus of control in process in the domiciliary which may speak more appropriately to the differences between the present study and the work of Nehrke et al. (in press).

In summary, the picture that emerges from the present data is one wherein the oldest veterans are significantly more satisfied with self and situation than the younger elderly veterans and that self concept and life satisfaction are both positively related to age. The older veterans, whether as a function of more extensive disengagement, better resolution of the ego integrity vs despair crisis or both, appear to have more adequately reconciled their lives in spite of having spent more time in what has

traditionally been referred to as a sterile or blunting environment.

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TABLE 1

Correlation Matrix for the VA

Residents Across All Variables

| | Years of Education | Years at Bath VA | Self Concept | Life Satisfaction | Locus of Control |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | -.2933*** | .3974*** | .2296** | .2560*** | -.1068 |
| Year of Education | | -.2659** | .1775* | .0528 | .2156* |
| Years at Bath VA | | | .0296 | .0833 | -.1085 |
| Self Concept | | | | .4760 § | .1704* |
| Life Satisfaction | | | | | .0859 |

NOTE: N varied from 85 to 99 for the various comparisons so that r required at each p level does vary somewhat.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .005$

§ $p < .001$